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## **Learner attention to form in ACCESS task-based interaction**

### **Abstract**

This study explored the potential effects of communicative tasks developed using a reformulation of a task-based language teaching called Automatization in Communicative Contexts of Essential Speech Sequences (ACCESS) that includes automatization of language elements as one of its goals on learner attention to form in task-based interaction. The interaction data collected from a class for English as a second language (ESL) over a four-week period was analysed for incidence, outcome and characteristics (i.e. focus, initiation, response, and turn length) of language related episodes (LREs) operationalized as evidence of learner attention to form. The results showed that during ACCESS task-based interactions, learners attended to form as reflected in a large number of LREs. Despite being brief, a majority of these LREs were correctly resolved, self-initiated, self and other responded, and focused on the target linguistic item: past tense verbs. These results are discussed in terms of the potential effects of ACCESS task principles, different task features (i.e. task complexity, pre-task modelling, speaker role and group size), and learners' approach to tasks on the incidence and characteristics of LREs.

**Keywords:** ACCESS, attention to form, classroom, peer interaction, repetition

## Introduction

Research investigating interaction and subsequent development in task activities is largely drawn from a cognitive interactionist perspective of second language learning (Gass, 2003; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2012; Mackey & Gass, 2006). These studies investigated various characteristics of tasks to examine opportunities for comprehensible input opportunities (Long, 1983, 1996) and output opportunities (Swain, 1995, 1998). The tasks employed in these studies were largely meaning focused. Findings indicate that the goal of development of formal accuracy has not been automatically achieved through primarily meaning focus and mere communication (Harley & Swain, 1984; Pica, 2002; Swain, 1985). In addition, studies examining corrective feedback and interactional moves found that despite the frequent interaction observed, learner attention to form was rare (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Williams, 2001). This suggests the need to draw learners' attention to form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Nassaji, 1999) because learners' incidental attention to formal aspects of language in meaning focused interaction (Long, 1983) is believed to promote the accuracy in linguistic features, especially through direct or indirect corrective feedback (e.g. Adams, 2007; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey & Philp, 1998).

However, drawing learners' attention to form during meaning-focused interaction still remains one of the major challenges in task-based language teaching (TBLT). In this study, we argue that repetition feature built in tasks developed under the Automatization in Communicative Contexts of Essential Speech Sequences (ACCESS) approach (Gatlinton & Segalowitz, 2005) promotes learner attention to form. Tasks designed following ACCESS approach are to promote automatization, achieved by stipulating that the tasks are genuinely communicative, inherently repetitive and formulaic. These design characteristics are assumed to ensure that functional utterances used in discussing the task topics would be produced and used repeatedly in genuine communicative contexts. Thus, the tasks are manipulated to induce repetition, which is not just an add-on but becomes a main means of reaching task goals. It is proposed that

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repetition of using these functional utterances in a genuinely communicative context provide learners with more opportunities to attend to both form and meaning. The purpose of the study was to examine whether tasks designed to draw learners' attention to form through communicative repetition – so-called ACCESS tasks – would draw their attention to form, operationalized through language-related episodes (LREs) defined as a discourse in which 'learners talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others' (Swain & Lapkin, 1995, p. 326). Specifically, the study aimed to find out the extent and characteristics of LREs that occurred when learners performed these ACCESS tasks.

### **Strategies to promote learner attention to form**

To date, two different strategies have been proposed to promote learner attention to form. The first strategy is conducted during task implementation. Teacher elects to focus learners on form, e.g. through corrective feedback and incidental grammatical explanation during learners' interaction. This strategy is conducted at the discretion of the teacher regardless of the design of the tasks. The second strategy to focus learners on form is to manipulate the task design. An earlier version of this strategy (Paulston, 1971; Rivers, 1972) was to add a form-focused instruction component before or after a communicative task. That is, instead of there being just a single communicative activity, the activity is endowed with pre-task or post task components where the form to be practiced is focused upon. Task design is also manipulated to draw learners' attention to specific targeted features. Research findings indicated that in more cases than not, the targeted structures were elicited and often to the expected extent (Kowal & Swain, 1997). However, Tuz (1993) found that task target feature – attributive adjectival ordering – was not used to a desired degree in learner performance. This suggests that certain linguistic structures (e.g. adjectival order) are more difficult to elicit through tasks than others. Recent strategies to promote learner attention to form through manipulation of task design include pretask planning: learners prepare what they will do and say before carrying out tasks (Ellis, 2005; Ortega, 2005) and task repetition: task design is manipulated so that the task or aspects

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of the task are repeated for a different purpose and/or audiences (Bygate, 2001; Kim, 2013). In the next section, we propose that manipulating task features under ACCESS approach is one of the ways added to the current sets of strategies to promote learner attention to form.

### **ACCESS task principles**

One of the distinguishing characteristics of TBLT is its stringent requirement that classroom activities promoting language learning (called ‘tasks’) should be goal oriented. To current proponents of TBLT, it is the task itself that has to be endowed with features promoting linguistic knowledge, thus marrying form and meaning to promoting acquisition (e.g. Ortega, 2009). To strengthen this capacity of tasks, a recent reformulation of the TBLT–ACCESS approach (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005) adds an important component: automatization to the TBLT task design. To promote automatization, tasks are manipulated according to three main criteria (i.e. genuinely communicative need, inherent repetition and formulaic function) that are assumed to ensure that potentially reusable exemplars of the language would be produced and used repeatedly in communicative contexts.

More specifically, the genuinely communicative feature refers to the task requirement in which tasks must have an information-gap filling feature, and information to be exchanged is genuinely needed for continuing the task. From a cognitive perspective, through obtaining new information in this genuinely communicative condition, learners establish an elaborated mental context for memories of language segments or utterances produced and heard, which can be retrieved for subsequent use in different contexts. This practice and reuse of targeted forms and utterances therefore provide transfer appropriate processing conditions that facilitate memory retrieval (Roediger & Guynn, 1996), thereby benefiting learning. As for the *inherently repetitive* feature, it emphasizes repetition as a vehicle for achieving the task goal. That is, the same process, for example asking different members same questions/utterances to gather information needed for completing the task, is repeated over the course of task work. These repeated events, from a psychological view, may

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enhance automaticity of language reception and production (Schneider, Chein, 2003; Segalowitz, 2000). The final task feature – formulaic – points to the creation of functionally useful utterances with high reuse potential. Utterances targeted in the tasks are required to be typical and necessary for real life conversations. The focus on formulaicity fits the proposal of teaching language exemplars, which suggests the significant role of multiword constructions or actual language exemplars in language acquisition (Ellis, 2002; Wray, 2002). Details about the operationalization of these features through specific task examples are presented in Table 1.

Although the goal of ACCESS is to promote automatization, interactive conditions created by its task features are proposed to enhance learner attention to form because of two reasons. First, simultaneous exposure to speech segments produced by learners may lead them to establish a cognitive comparison of targetlike and non-targetlike versions (Tomasello & Herron, 1989). This comparison helps learners to notice deviant formal aspects of their language as opposed to targetlike ones, which is assumed to facilitate the internalization of language knowledge. Second, ACCESS task main features sustain a meaningful interaction and create numerous repeated opportunities for practicing the same sets of speech segments. This repeated practice in a communicative context may benefit learners by drawing their attention more to form as well as meaning. Kartchava and Gatbonton (2014) reported an analysis of the Alibi Game, a task designed according to the three ACCESS criteria and found that learners who were engaged in this task produced not only many utterances useful in talking about weekend activities (e.g. *We woke up, We had breakfast, We went on a trip*, etc.) but produced many tokens of each of these utterances (See also Gatbonton, Iwashita, Dao & Yang, 2013). Despite the meaning-focused nature of the task (i.e. learners have to describe what they did during the weekend in order to create an airtight alibi), the learners seemed to attend to form because they showed a significant increase in accuracy of irregular past-tense verbs from pre-test to post-test (Bygate & Gatbonton, 2015).

The necessity of including repetition of targeted linguistic features in task-based interaction has been emphasized in much research. For instance, research on

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classroom language (i.e. language produced by the teacher and the students) in immersion or intensive English programs which have primarily meaning-based orientations (Meara, Lightbown, & Halter, 1997) showed that the amount of learner exposure to particular linguistic structures seems minimal, with amounts falling below what is necessary for their acquisition in context. Collins, Trofimovich, Cardoso, White and Horst (2009) examined teacher talk in 400 hours of instruction in intensive English classrooms and found low incidences of targeted items for acquisition such as the regular simple past or personal pronouns 'his' or 'her'. This finding casts doubt that learners would be able to master these structures just from task performance. Their studies also confirm the results of earlier investigations of classroom language (e.g. Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Spada & Lightbown, 1993), which showed that multiple repetition of the same linguistic item was rare in the language produced in these classrooms (see also Horst, Cobb, and Meara, 1998). In short, Horst's (2010) observation that 'repetition in the amounts needed to support acquisition does not naturally occur' (p. 170) implies the need of creating repetition within interaction. This underlies the motivation of the current study to investigate the repetition feature built in ACCESS tasks with regard to learner attention to form.

### **Factors affecting learner attention to form**

Although different strategies have been conducted to promote learner attention to form as discussed earlier, the effectiveness of these strategies is subject to many factors especially in the classroom context. Studies on learner performance on tasks revealed that getting learners to attend to form depends on various factors. These include not only the teacher's involvement (Samuda, 2001; Williams, 2001), but also task complexity (Kim, 2013; Révész, 2009; Robinson, 2005; Robinson, & Gilabert, 2007), learner proficiency (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leiser, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007), and learners' approach to the task (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Much of this research operationalized learner attention to form through incidence of LREs. Swain (1998) argued that this kind of incidental focus on form LREs facilitates second language (L2) learning due to its possible 'function of helping students to understand

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the relationship between the meaning, forms, and function in a highly context-sensitive situation' (p. 69); they may, therefore, represent learning in progress (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Overall, simply focusing learner attention on form through teacher's implementation of tasks and manipulation of task design may not fully reflect how learners attend to form. Thus, different factors such as teacher's involvement, task features (i.e. task complexity) and learner's factor (i.e. their orientation towards task) need to be taken into consideration when investigating learner attention to form.

In summary, ACCESS tasks are developed with an aim of inducing repetition where learners repeat many tokens of targeted formulaic utterances to achieve task goals. The tasks are not designed in the way in which learners are required to focus on formal aspects of language in order to complete the task as measured with the occurrence of various feedback types and LREs in task-based interaction studies. Therefore, the question remains whether learners attend to form during the interaction in the course of task completion even if ACCESS tasks do not aim to explicitly do so. If learner attention to form is observed during the ACCESS task-based interaction, are they tied to the ACCESS task design itself, and/or other factors? Thus, this study investigated learners' attention to form operationalized through identification of incidental LREs in interaction generated by ACCESS tasks. Two questions are posed as below.

1. Do learners produce LREs during ACCESS task-based interaction? If so, what are the characteristics of LREs?
2. What factors affect the characteristics of these LREs?

## **The study**

### *Database*

The data for the current study was drawn from a larger project which investigated input frequency, formulaicity, and the acquisition of past-tense morphology (Gatbonton, Segalowitz, & Yanchak, 2011). Thirty three Chinese learners (11 males and 21 females) residing in Montreal, Canada participated in a two-hour weekly class over a



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period of four weeks. Their ages ranged from 21 to 35 years old ( $M = 29.8$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ). All participants had studied English at high school and university in China before migrating to Canada. According to the authors' observations, participants were not beginners as they understood a great deal of English when it was contextual and when spoken slowly. However, they lacked oral fluency and exhibited a lot of hesitation and other disfluencies in their speech. The participants were divided into two classes with approximately the same number of students.

These students were taught by two fluent speakers of English including a native speaker and a second language speaker. Both teachers had completed a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics at the time of the study. Both had more than five years of experience in teaching English in different teaching contexts in Canada and in other parts of the world. Each teacher taught the same class for the entire period, but the two teachers planned their lesson for each day together. They administered communicative activities in pair work, group work and whole class during the class over the four-week period. These activities were set up purposely for students to gain fluency and accuracy in using simple past-tense verbs that students claimed to have learnt in China. While monitoring the classroom activities, the teachers were advised to provide feedback if necessary. The topics covered in the classroom were daily issues such as weekend activities, past experiences, and personal stories. Some of which were taken from the textbook called *The bridge to fluency: Speaking 1* (Gatbonton, 1994). Classroom interactions taking place during class hours were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The teachers were expected to employ the ACCESS teaching approach. Prior to teaching, the teachers attended the workshop in order to understand the ACCESS principles and to learn how to use the materials developed for the ACCESS approach. This workshop focused on teaching contents, utterance-based approach and teacher role. The pedagogical teaching contents targeted in the ACCESS approach are specific exemplars of language or utterances that learners learn through completing ACCESS tasks.

More specifically, ACCESS teaching approach does not target specific grammar rules but sets of utterances or expressions that learners are expected to learn and

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reproduce fluently, accurately and appropriately in subsequent real-life communication; it is therefore called an utterance-based approach. The main focus of this teaching approach is to enhance fluency and accuracy through promoting automatization of utterances that are not under learners' control. As for the teacher roles, teachers can play different roles as a facilitator (ensuring the planned task executed smoothly), a monitor (keeping learners on task), and a language resource (providing language input when learners are in need). Teachers were also advised to give different kinds of feedback such as recast, prompts and elicitations on targeted utterances and on other aspects of language if inaccuracies impede comprehension. The data analysed for the current study was collected from one class consisting of 13 participants (2 males and 11 females). The participants were randomly assigned to pair work, and small group work activities. For this intact classroom, the teacher decided the amount of time for each task.

### *The tasks*

Six ACCESS tasks were used in the study. The first task was an *Alibi* task in which learners asked and answered about their past activities in order to create an alibi of activities. The second task was *False sentence guessing*, which required learners to identify one false sentence among three statements about each learner's past experience. The third task, *Domino-effect narrative*, asked learners to decide the cause of each accident in a series of domino-effect accidents. The fourth task, *Personal experience sharing*, was the one in which learners shared their previously worst accidents and decided which experience was the worst in the end. For the fifth task, *Making an explanation*, learners were asked to explain strange actions that they did in the past. Finally, in the last task, *Making an excuse*, learners were required to make a convincing excuse to the situation depicted in the given pictures.

The six tasks were varied in terms of the group size, input material (i.e. picture or no material), speaker role, information flow (i.e. one-way versus two-way), outcome (i.e. open versus closed), and pre-task modeling, but the ACCESS principles were strictly observed. The detailed information about ACCESS principles and other features of these six tasks is seen in Table 1. The first principle of ACCESS task, genuinely

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communicative, is operationalized through three main features: the number of participants, information gap and genuine need for exchanging information. To be genuinely communicative the task activity must involve at least two learners interacting with each other to complete a task by exchanging unshared information (i.e. information gap), and this exchanged information must be used to continue the task, that is, information passed on is genuinely needed for subsequent communication. For example, Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, shown in Table 1 involved three or four learners. In this task, learners were required to ask questions for new information (information-gap) to decide whether their friend's statement was false. New information provided in response to the first questions was the basis for learners to create next questions (i.e. genuine need of information). The second feature, inherently repetitive, of ACCESS task refers to the condition in which learners achieve the task goal through repeating certain targeted utterances. In Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, in order to judge the accuracy of a statement – for example, *I went to Canada last year* – learners may produce some specific targeted utterances or questions, e.g. *When did you go there? Who did you go with? Why did you go there? Where did you stay? How long did you stay there? Did you visit famous sites? What impressed you the most?* etc. After verifying the first statement, they may repeat these specific utterances verbatim or with slight modifications for the second statement and later for next members. The repetition is necessary because the task is completed only after all members' statements are verified. In this way, learners repeat essential utterances to complete the task, which clearly indicates the built-in feature of repetition within task execution. Apart from this within task repetitive feature, the targeted utterances as given above clearly have a pragmatic value for later use in real life communication outside the classroom where learners share about their holiday, visits or adventures. This pragmatic function and potentially high reuse is the functionally formulaic feature of ACCESS tasks.

### *Coding*

This study investigated whether learners generated LREs in ACCESS task-based interaction, and what factors accounted for the characteristics of these LREs. The

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transcribed data of learner interactions during task activities were, first, coded for incidental LREs following the definition provided above (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Due to the classroom context, many learner-learner interactions involved the teacher, and therefore the data were extended to include LREs in which the teacher initiated and responded to language problems. Subsequently, the characteristics of LREs were further examined in terms of type (lexical, and grammatical LREs), outcome (correctly resolved, incorrectly resolved and unresolved LREs), initiation (teacher, self or peer-initiation), response (teacher, self or peer response), and length (words per LRE, and conversational turns per interaction).

For types and outcome of LREs, the current study followed the taxonomy used by Williams (2001) and Leeson (2004). Grammatical LREs are occasions in which learners talk about grammatical features of a language. Example 1 extracted from Task 3, *Domino-effect narrative*, displays a grammatical LRE in which two learners talked about the correct past-tense form of the verb *catch*.

Example 1. A grammatical LRE.

- 1 S1: One day a plane uh caught on fire, Sam jumped out jumped out
- 2 S2: Caught caught not cut caught.
- 3 S1: Caught oh
- 4 S2: Caught. I sink (*think*) uh this word.
- 5 S1: You means uh ka caught cote cote.
- 6 S2: Uh catch uh
- 7 S1: Catch caught caught

8 S2: Yes the catch past word I sink (*think*) I sink (*think*) uh this word uh.

9 S1: Caught uh

10 S2: I sink uh this word. Yeah I'm not sure.

11 S1: Um caught

12 S2: Uh airplane uh caught on fare.

Lexical LREs are the occasions in which learners discuss the meaning, spelling and pronunciation. In Example 2 extracted from Task 3, *Domino-effect narrative*, both learners discussed the meaning and a choice of a word to describe *an oil truck*.

#### Example 2. Lexical LRE.

1 S1: The cars uh craa ... Crash cars

2 S2: Oil oh the oil, it's oil car, um oil car and the crashed crash crash crash

3 S1: Ah it's not a car it's truck

4 S2: Trucker okay, t r u c

5 S1: Crash the car

6 S2: the dreever maybe it's

7 S1: ...

8 S2: Oh the driver Ben

9 S1: the oil truck truck uh crash uh ... a car

Regarding LRE outcomes, segments of interaction in which learners could provide a correct answer to a language problem were coded as correctly resolved LREs. In Example 3 extracted from Task 1, *Alibi*, after a learner produced an inaccurate past-tense form of the verb *go*, the teacher repeated this inaccurate utterance to elicit the reformulation from the learner. As a result, the learner noticed the error and reformulated her utterance by supplying a correct tense-form *went*.

Example 3. Correctly resolved LREs.

1 S1: Uh huh the park at four o'clock, and uh and uh we just go for a walk.

2 S2: Uh huh.

3 S1: And uh

4 T: We go for a walk?

5 S1: Huh?

6 T: We go for a walk?

7 S1: No we went for a walk.

8 T: We went for a walk, ok.

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9 S2: Went for a walk.

10 S1: Yeah went for a walk. Went for a walk and saw somebody play basketball,  
the football and so on.

Incorrectly resolved LREs refer to a segment of interaction in which an incorrect answer was provided to language problem. In Example 4 extracted from Task 3, *Domino-effect narrative*, two learners discussed the grammatical accuracy of the phrase *be stuck in the tree*, but they finished with an inaccurate result *he stuck on the tree*.

Example 4. Incorrectly resolved LRE.

1 S1: He stuck on a tree, just uh

2 S2: Oh yeah he stuck

3 S1: by the tree

4 S2: He was stuck by the tree

5 S1: No stuck uh I think he's many be we can only say he stuck the tree

6 S2: He stuck the tree?

7 S1: yeah. By the tree

8 S2: I think uh he was stuck

9 S1: He was stuck in the on the tree

10 S2: He was stuck in on the tree

11 S1: No I don't think so, he stuck

12 S2: And how how bout this person?

13 S1: Uh he stuck on the tree, stuck on the tree

14 S2: he was stucked uh he stuck uh on the tree. Uh on the tree okay. That's correct. We finished it

Finally, unresolved LREs are an instance where the learners could not solve a language problem and skipped the problem. In Example 5 extracted from Task 3, *Domino-effect narrative*, two learners were finding a word to describe *an oil truck*, but they could not solve the problem and therefore decided to skip and moved on.

Example 5. Unresolved LRE.

1 S1: I don't know how to say

2 S2: Uh how to say this kind of tunk uh tunk uh

3 S1: No it's not tank.

4 S2: No a tank uh card. You uh you could say uh this kind of oil tunk

5 S1: Oil tank

6 S2: I don't know how to say this kind of tunk



7 S1: This type of tank

8 S2: Yeah uh

9 S1: Uh we can ask uh after.

In addition to the taxonomy of coding LREs explained above, two additional categories with regard to the initiator and respondent of the linguistic problem were included in the analysis. Initiator and respondent were categorized into three types following Philp, Walter, & Basturkmen (2010): self, peer, and teacher. An example of peer-initiated and peer-responded LRE is illustrated in Example 1, in which the second learner initiated the problem of past-tense form of the word *caught* and later on responded to the problem by explaining *caught* being a past-tense form of *caught*. Example 2 represents a self-initiated LRE in which the learner initiated the difficulty finding a word to express *an oil truck*. Finally, Example 3 displays a teacher-initiated and self-responded LRE, in which the teacher initiated the problem by repeating the inaccurate utterance *We go for a walk* and the learner responded by a correct one *we went for a walk*. As for coding talking turn, each time the learner took a turn to talk was counted as one turn. For instance, Example 1 above consists of 12 turns. For interrater reliability a second coder coded 20% of the whole data independently, and then the results of the coded data between the researcher (the first author) and the second coder were crosschecked for inter-reliability scores, shown in Appendix 1. The high percentage agreement (between 80 and 90%) indicated that there was a high level of agreement.

## Results

***Research question 1: Do learners produce LREs during ACCESS task-based interaction? If so, what are the characteristics of LREs?***

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The number of LREs generated during the six task activities is summarized in Table 2. A total of 430 LREs occurred in 29 pair/group interactions across the six tasks. Thus, ACCESS tasks generated a substantial number of LREs, which indicates that learners attended to form. The learners’ attention to formal aspects of language during their interactions to complete the tasks is also reflected in the percentage of LRE turns. That is, turns involving LRE ( $n = 1,736$ ) accounted for 30.3% of the total conversational turns ( $n = 5,713$ ). As for resolution of LREs, a majority of language problems in LREs were correctly resolved (77.9%) of LREs, leaving 4.2% and 17.9% of them being incorrectly resolved and unresolved, respectively. These results indicated that when learners attended to their language problems, they were likely to solve them successfully.

With regard to LRE types, the results showed that learners attended to both grammatical and lexical features, with grammatical LREs ( $n = 284$ ) produced in six tasks being approximately twice as many as lexical LREs ( $n = 146$ ). Notably, 76.8% of the total grammatical LREs or 50.7% of the total grammatical and lexical LREs was on the target linguistic feature (i.e. past-tense verbs). This means learners frequently attended to grammatical features, especially the target linguistic item, although these classroom activities were meaning focused.

Table 2

*A summary of language related episodes (LREs) generated in the six tasks.*

Task	Total LREs	Breakup frequency according to the outcome		
		Correctly resolved	Incorrectly resolved	Unresolved
1	51	48	2	1
2	50	46	2	2
3	135	106	21	8
4	57	43	13	1
5	39	25	13	1
6	98	67	26	5
Total	430	335 (77.9%)	77 (4.2%)	18 (17.9%)

Table 3  
*Length of language related episodes (LREs) in turns*

Turn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Number of LREs	139	85	40	46	25	21	16	7	1	2	4	8

As summarized in Table 3, the length of LRE measured through conversational turns ranged from 1 to 29 turns, with a majority of LREs involving from 1 to 6 conversational turns. These LREs were generally short and brief with an average number of turns per LRE being approximately four ( $SD = 4.45$ ), and an average number of words per LRE being 29 ( $SD = 27.3$ ). These results indicated that despite attending to language problems, learners did not override the overall focus on meaning during their interaction.

In addition, single turn LREs were noticeably the most frequent, accounting for 32.3% ( $n = 139$ ) of the total produced LREs. As can be seen in Example 6 extracted from Task 1, *Alibi*, while learner 1 was discussing with her partner about past activities in order to create their alibi, she recognized her grammatically incorrect utterance *you are*. Immediately, she corrected it to *you were*. This indicated that learners noticed their language problems and attempted to correct themselves.

Example 6.

S1: Ate uh break first uh. Uh how how long uh? Oh I sink [think] we don't need this one.

And this eight o'clock you are you were be at my home so we didn't need this how long.

Moreover, of the 430 LREs produced in interactions a small number of LREs were more than five turns in length. These LREs, however, indicated that learners were more engaged and discussed the language problems more extensively. Noticeably, over 90% of the long turn LREs were lexical based. Example 7 below, extracted from Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, shows an instance of a long turn LRE in which learners discussed extensively a language problem. In this example, although learners' discussion was on the causes of a series of connected accidents, they showed a great attention to a language form – a choice of one lexical item (e.g. *electrical instruments*) – and discussed this problem over 30 conversational turns.

Example 7.

- 1 S1: Some
- 2 S2: Electrical um development
- 3 S1: Problem, electrical?
- 4 S2: Instruction you can say electrical facilities in the plane
- 5 S1: Facility?
- 6 S2: Okay forget
- 7 S1: Oh yeah facility
- 8 S2: No we cannot
- 9 S1: Facilitates

10 S2: Say that we just say electric electrical um

11 S1: Equipment

12 S2: Uh ye no equipment I sink

13 S1: Uh instruments uh circuits uh uh part.

14 S2: We should we should uh studied uh stayed uh which uh speaking  
languages we in was uh simple as possible

15 S1: As uh seem as possible

16 S2: As uh simple as uh

17 S1: Yeah

18 S2: As uh possible

19 S1: So you can say electrical facilities.

20 S2: No we cannot say

21 S1: Why? Why?

22 S2: I think uh the facilities only can happen in

23 S2: No we cannot say

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- 24 S2: I think uh the facilities only can happen in
- 25 S1: Or uh English uh, no one of um my English teacher explain that uh facility  
is use uh to is use uh to uh refers to they uh things uh which is uh ah benefit uh  
for uh people do something.
- 26 S2: We can only say electrical instrument
- 27 S1: Uh instrument
- 28 S2: Ins
- 29 S1: Instrument
- 30 S2: Instrument okay

Notably, many of long turn LREs showed teacher's involvement. In Example 8 extracted Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, when learners took turns making questions to decide whether their friend's statement was false, learner 2 indicated a lexical problem – a word to describe *investor class immigrant* – which led to an extensive discussion of this lexical item among them, and the problem was only resolved when the teacher participated in the discussion of this lexical problem.

Example 8.

- 1 S1: For which reason uh did she uh immigrate?
- 2 S2: Uh I can use Chinese words?
- 3 S1: Yeah.

- 4 S3: Try to use your English.
- 5 S3: No this mean uh investigate investigate.
- 6 S1: Investment investigate investment.
- 7 S3: Investment invest uh immigrate.
- 8 S2: Invest uh immigrate. Uh I don't know how to.
- 9 S3: Yeah. Uh we should ask uh ask her.
- 10 S1: Excuse.
- 11 S3: Excuse me yeah I will ask you a word how to the the person who immigrate to Canada uh for invest uh investigate.
- 12 S1: Investa
- 13 T1: Investor?
- 14 S3: Yeah investor ah you know.
- 15 T1: An investor class immigrant? To invest?
- 16 S3: Ah you know uh we come here as a new immigrate as a techno tehno
- 17 S1: Technology immigration.

18 S3: Technology immigrate. There's another kind of immigrate.

19 T1: Investor class they put money.

20 S3: Yeah what's the what's the name of?

21 S4: Uh she she put uh have to create one company in Canada.

22 T1: Yeah an investor class immigrant.

23 S4: Crass investor crass.

24 S1: Ah

25 S3: Ah investor.

26 T1: Yeah investor class immigrant.

Table 4 summarizes the characteristics of LREs regarding initiation and response. Self-initiated LREs ( $n = 267$ ) and self-responded LREs ( $n = 194$ ) were the most frequent across the tasks. This indicates that learners were able to notice their language problems and subsequently corrected themselves in their interaction. The teacher helped the learners identify these language problems during their interactions (teacher-initiated LREs,  $n = 74$ ), which focused their attention on form. She also functioned as a language resource for learners to seek in solving these problems (teacher responded LREs = 123).

Furthermore, peers were able to initiate and respond to language problems during interactions. Although peers responded to fewer language problems in LREs ( $n = 82$ ) than the teacher ( $n = 123$ ), they initiated more LREs ( $n = 89$ ) than the teacher ( $n = 74$ ). This indicated that apart from the learners themselves and the teacher, peers also



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commented on or corrected their partners' output. It is also worth pointing out that in self and peer-responded LREs ( $n = 31$ ) both learners worked together in order to find solutions to language problems. This demonstrated that learners made an attempt to resolve the problems collaboratively when they were not able to do so individually.

Table 4  
*Characteristics of language-related episodes (LREs) (initiation and response) generated in all tasks.*

Initiation		Response			
		Self	Peer	Teacher	Self and peer
Self	267	167	31	49	20
Peer	89	21	51	6	11
Teacher	74	6	—	68	—
Total		194	82	123	31

Table 5

*Characteristics of language-related episodes (LREs) (types, turn and length) in relation to task features*

Task	Types of LREs		Total LREs	LREs per interaction		Turns per LRE		Words per LRE	
	Grammar	Lexis		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1	38	13	51	10.2	1.9	3.1	1.9	19.0	12.9
2	37	13	50	16.6	8.3	3.7	3.6	33.5	31.8
3	75	60	135	24.6	14.3	5.5	5.5	42.3	32.3
4	43	14	57	11.4	2.5	3.8	4.9	27.3	25.4
5	21	18	39	9.5	6.5	3.5	5.2	29.0	30.0
6	70	28	98	19.5	6.2	3.1	3.0	28.2	18.2

***Research question 2: What factors affect the characteristics of these LREs?***

The incidence and characteristics of LREs appeared to vary according to specific task features. A detailed description of LREs in relation to features of each task is provided in Tables 5 and 6. As can be seen from Table 5, the total number of LREs produced in each task was considerably different across the tasks, with the range of total LREs per task from 39 to 135. Nevertheless, all six tasks shared a similar pattern that they all generated more grammatical LREs than lexical LREs. Noticeably, five out of the six tasks had twice the number of grammatical LREs over the number of lexical LREs with the exception of Task 3 (a convergent narrative task). In addition, Tasks 3 and 6 (discussion narrative tasks) produced a considerably larger number of LREs compared to other tasks.

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For the initiation of language problems in LREs, as shown in Table 6, the number of self-initiated LREs was consistently higher than that of peer-initiated and teacher-initiated LREs across the six tasks, and there was no consistent difference in frequencies of peer-initiated and teacher-initiated LREs. Moreover, there was no obvious difference across the tasks in term of respondents to language problems in LREs. In other words, either the learners themselves, their peers or their teacher randomly responded to language problems. Furthermore, in Table 6, there were LREs in which the response was from both the learner and his/her peers. As shown in Example 2 earlier, which was

Table 6  
*Characteristics of language-related episodes (LREs) (initiation and response) in relation to task features*

Task	Initiation			Total LREs	Response			
	Self	Peer	Teacher		Self	Peer	Teacher	Self and peer
1	27	16	8	51	26	18	5	2
2	24	10	16	50	17	9	21	3
3	80	24	31	135	37	22	59	17
4	38	11	8	57	33	7	11	6
5	29	8	2	39	25	7	5	2
6	69	20	9	98	56	19	22	1

extracted from Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, both the learner and their peer collaboratively discussed the problems on a lexical item (e.g. *oil truck/car*). This indicated the co-construction of meaning among learners.

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In summary, learners showed to attend to form as reflected in the large number of LREs. More than half of the language problems observed in these LREs concerned the target linguistic feature. They were generally very short and the majority of them were correctly resolved. The results also revealed that learners attended to both grammar and lexis, especially with the number of grammatical LREs being twice as many as lexical LREs. In addition, the results indicated that although learners generally initiated language problems, the responses to these problems were either from themselves, their peers or the teacher. The data also demonstrated that despite a difference in the occurrence of these incidental LREs, all six tasks generated a larger number of grammatical than lexical LREs with the exception of Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*. Notably, Task 3 and Task 6, *Making an excuse*, generated the highest number of LREs over the other tasks. These results will be discussed in the next section.

## Discussion

The current study explored learner attention to form and factors contributing to characterizing ACCESS task-based interaction in light of the incidence and characteristics of LREs. In the following section the results will be discussed concerning how the three main features of ACCESS tasks affect learner attention and characteristics of their interaction, and how different factors contribute to characterizing task-based interaction.

### *Effects of ACCESS task features on learner attention to form*

The data showed that a relatively large number of LREs were generated in all six tasks. This finding is contrary to other classroom-based studies (Philp et al., 2010; Williams, 2001), which reported that learners initiated LREs infrequently in oral classroom-based activities. This difference can be attributed to the ACCESS features that characterize peer interactions. As explained above, the ACCESS tasks were designed to provide learners with a genuinely communicative and inherently repetitive condition where they are expected to produce and practice a set of speech segments or utterances using past-tense verbs. This inherently repetitive feature of the tasks

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appeared to result in a large number of grammatical LREs related to the target linguistic feature, which proved the most frequent across all six tasks. Furthermore, unlike tasks used in many interaction studies, ACCESS tasks are not designed to generate interaction to discuss language problems, but to simply use a set of formulaic utterances repeatedly over time with other learners. The communicative condition for recycling these targeted utterances that the ACCESS tasks created led learners to attend to form in the course of task completion.

Another reason for the difference in the occurrence of LREs from previous studies is that while the majority of tasks were communicative and meaning focused (e.g. Philp et al., 2010), they did not target any specific linguistic features either explicitly or implicitly. In contrast, while ACCESS tasks are meaning focused, the use of target linguistic feature (i.e. past-tense verbs) is built into the task design through repeated use of the targeted utterances during communication. To a certain extent, this inherently repetitive feature of ACCESS task addresses the concern about the insufficiency of exposure and rare repeated use of the same target structures in language classroom (Collins et al., 2008; Horst, 2010; Meara et al., 1997; Spada & Lightbown, 1993).

In addition, the learners' interactions generated by ACCESS tasks were primarily meaning focused but not explicitly form focused as those used in previous studies (e.g. Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). Evidence of the learners' primary focus on meaning was shown in the ratio of turns involving LREs to total conversational turns. This indicates the impacts of ACCESS task feature, i.e. goal-oriented (also one of the major tenets of TBLT tasks) on learner-learner interaction. Also noted above, the results revealed that ACCESS tasks were successful in eliciting the task target linguistic feature. These ACCESS tasks were not form-focused tasks or designed to explicitly elicit target structures as those used in previous studies (e.g. Mackey, 1999; Sterlacci, 1996). Rather, the elicitation of target structure occurred naturally due to a repeated use of certain utterances involving this target feature during interaction, which resulted in learners' frequent attention to form, the target structures (i.e. past-tense verbs). Thus, these characteristics of ACCESS tasks in which the targeted features were repeatedly

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and spontaneously used to achieve the task goals can be referred to what Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) identified as 'Task naturalness of a structure' (p. 132).

The interaction shown in Example 9 below, extracted from Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, illustrates the characteristics of ACCESS task clearly. In this excerpt, learners attempted to find out whether the sentence *I went to Toronto last year* is true or not by generating many functionally formulaic questions (e.g. *When did you go there? Why did you go there? How long you had been there? Where did you live in China, etc.*). These utterances have a very high potential use in real-world communication. Thus, in order to achieve the task goal, learners reproduced a set of targeted questions or utterances through which the target feature was repeatedly used. Also, in this example, when the learners switched their talking turns (lines 3, 5, 17), similar functionally formulaic questions were repeatedly produced by other learners.

This excerpt also shows that learners' interactions were genuinely communicative because the information solicited was used to make additional questions in order to judge the fact as true or false. As a result, learners repeatedly used the past-tense verbs to make and answer the questions. Noticeably, in line 18 in Example 9, learners attended to the past-tense verbs and immediately attempted to make them more target like. Therefore, it can be argued that though not conclusive, it is possible that learner's attention was drawn to form. Overall, the findings suggest that features of ACCESS tasks potentially had an impact on learner attention and shaped learner-learner interaction.

#### Example 9.

- 1     S1: Uh the last uh one (sentence) is uh, I have uh I I went I went to Toronto last uh year.
- 2     S2: Toronto last year?

3 S3: When when did you go to

4 S1: Uh nineteen ninety-nine.

5 S4: Why why did you go there?

6 S1: Uh I wanna find a job.

7 S4: How how how about the result?

8 S2: Did you find job?

9 S4: Yeah. Didn't find it?

10 S1: Uh yeah I didn't find it.

11 S2: Okay.

12 S3: How long and you had uh been there?

13 S1: Yeah uh about uh three months.

14 S4: Uh which company did you go go for go to for the job?

15 S1: Which company?

16 S4: Yeah which companies?

17 S3: Where did you live uh in China? Where?

- 18 S1: Yeah uh I live in Beijing before I come I came to Canada.
- 19 S3: So why did you went to find a job in [Chinese]?
- 20 S1: Yes, in my first company was man uh there were many chance to find a job, over there.
- 21 S4: Computer job?
- 22 S1: Yes.
- 23 S4: But you were not satisfied with the job?
- 24 S1: Yeah I didn't find it.
- 25 S4: Okay. The the second sentence okay.

Regarding the resolution of LREs, the learners were generally able to correctly resolve the linguistic problems encountered in their interactions. This result indicated that learners noticed their linguistic problems and resolved them correctly. However, despite the correct resolution of language problems, whether the learners are able to recall or use them correctly in the future is still unclear (Niu, 2009). This is partly because a majority of LREs generated were very short in turn length. Therefore, it seems that the learners noticed the problem in the form, attempted to resolve it, but may not internalize it (see Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Nassaji and Tian (2010) also pointed out the same issue in their study that despite the participants' success in task completion, their interactions were very brief and not sufficient enough for internalizing the form. Thus, the large number of correctly resolved LREs in the current



study results does not suggest that ACCESS tasks will necessarily lead to acquisition of the target form because the results

### *Characteristics of peer interaction generated by ACCESS tasks*

One of the main findings was that more than half of the LREs generated were self-initiated and self-responded or self-corrected. This was consistent with Shehadeh's (2001) finding that self-initiation led learners to frequently modify their output, which suggests a vital role of self-initiation in promoting occurrence of modified output or creating opportunities for learner to initiate and self-repair their language problem. This finding also implies that learners went through a mental process of reasoning about linguistic choice, and compared crosslinguistic equivalence (GarcíaMayo, 2002), which induced them to make changes in their production. In order to do that, learners possibly relied on their prior knowledge gleaned from their previous L2 learning experience to solve the language problems. Besides, similar to other studies (e.g. Colina & García-Mayo, 2007; Kim, 2008), peers initiated and responded to the language problems in LREs.

Additionally, in some LREs learners jointly solved the problem. For instance, in Example 7 extracted from Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, as shown earlier, while describing domino effect accidents one learner initiated a lexical problem after hearing her peer's utterance (line 3). Afterwards, they discussed extensively until they reached a consensus (lines 4 to 30). Example 8 extracted from Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, as shown in the results section also illustrates this point. When one learner attempted to answer her partner's question about the reason for immigration, she encountered a lexical problem, and suggested speaking in her first language (line 2). However, another learner disagreed and suggested using English to solve the problem (line 4). Although they could not solve the problem by themselves, they attempted to discuss the problem (lines 8–9). Another interesting point related to characteristics of the LREs observed in the present study is the teacher's involvement in initiating and solving the learners' language problems, which seems typical to the language classroom (Philp et al., 2010; Williams, 2001). When the teacher joined the learners' interaction, she often

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assisted them in solving the language problems by providing a brief explanation. In that case, learners considered the teacher as a linguistic resource to rely on whenever they encountered problems. As a result, learners in this study were able to resolve language problems correctly with the teacher's assistance. This indicated a transfer of knowledge from an 'expert' (i.e. teacher) to a 'novice' (i.e. learner).

Example 8 extracted from Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, illustrates how the teacher provided assistance during peer interaction. In this excerpt, the teacher provided short responses to the learner's inquiries (e.g. lines 13, 15, 19) about a noun phrase *investor class immigrant* to help her form a response to her partner's question. However, although the teacher's assistance was explicitly sought (line 11), the learner was able to evaluate the teacher's input. For example, when the teacher suggested an answer *investor* (line 13), the learner S3 indicated that the suggested answer did not meet her expectation by adding more information (lines 16, 18, 20) so that the teacher could offer the most appropriate answer *investor class immigrant*. The learner S4 also joined the interaction by providing further information adding to the explanation of the learner: S1 (line 21). This indicated that the learners considered teacher input useful and led the discourse – offering information and requesting the answer – which appeared to be effective and more facilitative of L2 (Toth, 2008).

Furthermore, the teacher's instructional feedback also seemed to account in part for the learner attention to the target form. That is, in the ACCESS approach the teacher is advised to selectively give feedback on targeted utterances. Thus, in this study, the teacher with an instructional goal of helping learners to automatize target linguistic items appeared to intentionally draw the learners' attention to the targeted form. This emphasizes the important role the teacher plays in assisting learners in interaction (see Samuda, 2001). However, this intervention can be counter-effective if it turns the interaction into an unnecessary teaching instance as Lynch (1997) suggested. That is, when the teacher occasionally perceives the interaction as problematic and potentially resulting in breakdown and decides to intervene although learners have not sought help, it may remove learners' autonomy and opportunities for negotiating and discussing the communication problems, thereby hampering L2 learning. Thus, teacher's intervention

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during learner– learner interaction should be need specific, timely, and carried out with care for the sake of assisting instead of hampering learner–learner interaction.

#### *Impacts of different factors on characteristics of peer task-based interaction*

As shown in Tables 5 and 6 in the results section, Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, and Task 6, *Making an excuse*, generated the largest number of LREs, which seems to be related to task complexity along the dimension of interactional demands (for a Triad Componential Framework for task classification, see Robinson, 2011). That is, these two tasks were the most challenging and complex because they restricted their performance to a specific task outcome: describing the given pictures (convergent and close-ended outcome). However, in other tasks learners had more freedom to work out outcomes (divergent and open-ended outcome) based on their own choice and language resources (e.g. learners' last weekend activities, and personal experiences). Moreover, the task complexity in terms of cognitive demands was increased when the pictures provided for learners to complete the tasks were intricately detailed, cognitive factors: more/fewer elements (Robinson, 2011). Therefore, it is more likely that the more complex and interactionally demanding the tasks are the more likely learners are encouraged to engage in discussion and negotiation. This result supports Robinson's claim (2001a, 2001b, 2005) that when task complexity increases, learners attempt to allocate more attention to many linguistic areas.

Furthermore, the results indicated that Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, Task 4, *Personal experience sharing*, and Task 5, *Making an explanation*, generated fewer LREs compared with Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, and Task 6, *Making an excuse*. This can be attributed to other task factors (i.e. pre-task modelling, speaker role, and group size) and learners' approach to tasks. In these three tasks learners did not receive any pre-task modelling. Thus, it is possible that pre-task modelling affected their performance (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Kim & McDonough, 2011; Ortega, 2005; Willis & Willis, 2007). In addition, the speaker's role in these three tasks was not equally shared due to unequal distribution of information. Therefore, it is likely that some learners became more passive because they acted as receivers of information from the suppliers, namely more active speakers. Accordingly, less negotiation occurred, and

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consequently fewer LREs were generated. This finding supports the claim made in Yule and MacDonald's (1990) study that the interlocutor's role was influential in learners' interaction. Besides, previous studies suggested that a task can be carried out differently depending on whether learners were assigned in pairs or groups (Dobao, 2012; Foster, 1998). The present study also provided some evidence to support this claim about variance of task performance according to group size. The results showed that small group tasks such as Task 5, *Making an explanation*, and Task 4, *Personal experience sharing*, task generated fewer numbers of LREs than pair work tasks such as Task 3, *Domino effect task*, and Task 6, *Making an excuse*. Presumably, while learners worked in pairs they felt responsible for working together with their partner to complete the task. In a group task some active and enthusiastic members may carry the majority of the task load (Foster, 1998).

Moreover, learners' different approach to tasks appeared to affect their attention to form. For example, it seems that the learners perceived Task 2, *False sentence guessing*, and Task 4, *Personal experience sharing*, as an opportunity to share their past personal experience compared to other more pedagogically imposed tasks such as Task 3, *Domino effect narrative*, and Task 6, *Making an excuse*. They appeared to focus on meaning rather than the target linguistic items. This finding is in line with Sercu, De Wachter, and Kuiken's (2006) study that it is not always effective to remind the students of the target linguistic item. In addition, it is possible that with the interpretation of the tasks as an activity of sharing personal experiences instead of practicing the linguistic feature, the learners eventually focused on meaning. This supports Coughlan and Duff's (1994) argument that the way learners perceive, orientate and interpret the task determines their interaction and performance.

In summary, the discussion above highlights the following main issues. First, ACCESS task features influenced learner attention to form during their interaction. Second, as the tasks were carried out in an intact classroom, there was an intertwined relationship among factors including task design: ACCESS main task principles, different task features, learners' approach to tasks and teacher's involvement, which altogether affected how the learners attended to form. Among these factors, it is

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pragmatically possible that manipulation of task design could draw learners' attention more to a specific form, and then shape the characteristics of their interaction accordingly (Ellis, 2003; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007). Third, learners' orientation to tasks also appeared to play a significant role in determining the characteristics of task-based interaction. Finally, feedback from peers and teachers especially when learners actively seek in order to solve language problems may be more facilitative of L2 learning.

### **Conclusions**

The goal of this study was to give a detailed description of a classroom task-based interaction by analysing the performance of learners completing six ACCESS tasks. Specifically, the study investigated learner attention to form in relation to the three main principles of ACCESS task and specific factors contributing to characterizing learner– learner interaction. The results showed that learners attended to form through LREs although the overall focus of their interaction was on meaning to fulfil the task goals. The analysis of characteristics of LREs showed that learner attention to form and characteristics of task-based interaction were affected by varied factors including ACCESS task principles, different task features (i.e. task complexity, pre-task modelling, speaker role and group size), learners' approach to tasks, and teacher's involvement.

The findings have two major pedagogical implications. First, since the three main ACCESS task criteria shaped learner–learner interaction to a certain extent by creating a genuinely communicative and inherently repetitive condition in which learners tended to attend to form due to a repeated use of certain utterances, these criteria should be considered in task design. Second, learner attention to form is likely affected by different factors such as task complexity, pre-task modelling, speaker role, group size, learners' approach towards tasks, and teacher involvement. Thus, L2 teachers should take these factors into account when designing and implementing teaching and learning activities.

Inevitably, the present study has limitations. Firstly, despite evidence that learners attended frequently to the target linguistic item –simple past-tense verbs, whether they

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have internalized them is still open to discussion. Secondly, it was shown that peer task-based interaction in a classroom setting was affected by proficiency (Leeser, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007, 2008; Williams, 2001). However, proficiency factor was not examined due to insufficient information about learner's level of proficiency.

Additionally, research showed that the way learners perceived their peers in interaction significantly affected how they carried out the tasks later (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Watanabe & Swain, 2008), this study did not examine this factor in details. Therefore, further studies should employ retrospective interviews (e.g. stimulated recall) to gain more in-depth understanding of this issue. Despite the limitations, this study suggests that teachers could manipulate task features based on principle tenets of ACCESS tasks and take account of other task features and learner's approach to tasks in order to implement a productive classroom task-based interaction.

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**Appendix 1**

Interrater reliability, coding of language related episodes (LREs)

Coding category (frequency of LREs)	Agreement percentage
LREs identified	98
Grammatical	86
Lexical	86
Correctly resolved	98
Incorrectly resolved	80
Unresolved	99
Self-initiated	95
Peer-initiated	83
Teacher-initiated	81
Self-response	80
Peer-response	90
Teacher-response	80